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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the relationship between the counseling supervisee and supervisor. Included are suggestions for better communication and ideas to foster the supervisee's individual and professional growth. (GCP)

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Pathways to Success: Professional Development throughout the Career Span

Presentation at the 111th Annual American Psychology Association Convention
August 4-8, 2003
Toronto, Ontario

by
Abigail Skillman

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Abstract for Abigail Skillman's presentation at the APA convention on August 7th, 2003.

ABSTRACT:

Pathways to Success- Professional Development Throughout the Career Span was a symposium at the 111th Annual American Psychological Association Convention in Toronto, Canada. This speech addressed the relationship between the supervisee and supervisor. Included are suggestions for better communication and ideas to foster the supervisee's individual and professional growth.

The name of this symposium is pathways to success. Which makes me picture gently curving sidewalks with white picket fences and flowers lining the walkway. And I don't know about you, but that isn't what graduate school feels like. It's more like hacking your way through the jungle, rationing water, and improvising as you go. And really, that's the way it should be. If your pathway to success is paved, then you are probably just trespassing on somebody else's.

There's such a fine line within the supervisee/supervisor relationship. It's the difference between following their lead and following in their footsteps. It sounds like a minor difference, but the distinction could be your entire career. It starts with the supervisor asking some version of the very simple question, "So what do you want to do in this field of psychology?" Which is a great getting to know you question assuming that the respondent can provide some 15 second game showesque introduction like, "My name is Suzie, I'm a third year doctoral student. My orientation is CBT and I enjoy working with children in underserved populations." I, however, have no such answer. Every sentence in my response starts with the phrase, "something like" or "similar to." And I found that I can't define my orientation without ending every word with "ish." My response to the question usually comes out like, "I'm mostly psychodynamic, with something like family systems, yet with an object relationish twist."

And that is when the first slippery slope of the supervisor/supervisee relationship begins. I can feel him lowering his eyes at him and putting me in that category of overgrown college juniors who haven't yet selected a major. And then I start to get nervous. Does that mean that I lack direction? Does this mean that I will never be a good psychologist? Does this mean that I am the biggest non-empirically validated mess to ever walk into this office?

It's a slippery slope because it is far too easy for the well-intentioned supervisor to misinterpret the vague response as a clear cry for strong guidance. The goal for the supervisor is not to whittle the student down to that polished 15 second game showesque introduction response. There is no room for learning in that type of a canned response mentality. The challenge for the supervisor is the further broaden that already expansive response. Because only through increased exposure will the student be able to decide what fits and doesn't fit with them. And only through that trial and error process, will their personal style emerge.

So point number 1 to both supervisor and supervisee is that it's okay if the supervisee can't define where he or she wants to go. It doesn't mean that they won't get there. It actually means that they have a much better chance of not just ending up where somebody else has been. At some point, Jung probably had to describe his concepts as Freudian 'ish.' And Freud probably had to introduce his theories as 'something like medicine.' We've all got to start somewhere.

Taking that first step away from the pressure to operationally define ourselves highlights the second fundamental, yet flawed, assumption of the supervisor/supervisee relationship. The best supervisor might not be the one in the position where you want to be, but the best one might be who can help you envision where you want to go. The same goes for the supervisor. When selecting supervisees, you shouldn't limit yourself to only those who are in positions similar to where you once were.

I did not pick my major reader for my dissertation committee based on who was the resident expert on my topic. Instead I selected her because when I walked into her office, while I was in the brainstorming stage of my dissertation and said, "I don't know if this is possible, but..." She cut me off and said, "We'll worry about logistics later. For now, just tell me what you're thinking." It was her commitment to allow me to define the direction of my dissertation rather than steering me with departmental suggestions, that has made for a successful match. Now I'll be the first to admit that this type of 'run with your vision' mentality, is probably contributing to the train wreck that is my methods section. But I love my dissertation topic. And I suspect a lot of that feeling is because I didn't pick a major reader based on who had completed a similar project, but who would support where I wanted to go. The best supervisor might not be the one who can lead with their experience, but who will give you the experience of leading.

And how can one develop this supervisor/supervisee relationship that will help that student find their own trail, rather than simply be lead down the supervisor's path? Well, honestly, I'm not really sure. But I know of four points that might be good places to start.

Point number 1- ASK. Even when you don't know what to ask. In fact, not knowing what to ask is the tell tale sign that you should start asking even more questions. Go ahead and say, "What's a good question to ask right now?" or "What should I be asking you?" You know that feeling that you get in class when you don't understand something, but you didn't get a chance to do the reading. So you don't want to ask the question because for all you know the answer could be in big bold caps in the text. In that situation, I would advise not asking the question. Go home, read the book, try again next week. But I would give the exact opposite advice when you have that feeling in supervision. Because that experience can not exist in supervision. You, by definition, are always prepared. As cliché as it sounds, you are always exactly where you should be. So ask away.

And the flip side for supervisors then, is to work diligently to create a relationship in which questions are not only encouraged, but cherished. Ask for them, beg for them, plead for them, pause for them, and most importantly, answer them. All of them. If a student says they don't have any questions, recognize and appreciate that they may not be comfortable enough to ask them, but understand that it is in fact highly unlikely that no questions have occurred to them. Also be very aware of the subtle deterring messages that you might be sending. I had a placement supervisor who at the end of a meeting, when I would say that I didn't have any questions, would say, "That's great, I'll see you next week." I assume he meant that it was great that I felt like I knew what I was doing. But the message eventually sunk in as, "you must be competent, you have no questions." There is no such thing as so competent that you have no questions. This was made quite clear to me during the last week of that year-long placement, when I realized that although I had been paying for on street parking, there was a free parking lot right out back. I had never asked.

In addition to asking questions, the second way to create a supervisor/supervisee relationship designed to foster the supervisee's individual growth is POINT NUMBER 2: TAKE UP SPACE. I had a supervisor with whom I always felt like I was taking up too much of his time. I sent emails in bullet points and left messages on post-it notes stuck to his desk. I learned that if you try to hide long enough, you will eventually actually become invisible. And unfortunately, I also

learned that the moment you become invisible, your learning will decrease drastically. So march into the office and pull up a seat. Your supervisor asked you to come work with them because he wanted you to fill a position. So take up all the necessary space, and fill it.

Supervisors, you are really the ones that set the stage for this issue. It is understandable that schedules may not permit lengthy lunches or discussions with supervisees, but at least in the beginning, go concrete. Set up a time to meet. Even if it's for ten minutes. Make it clear that you appreciate the work of the supervisee and you are glad that he or she is there. And if you realize that you haven't seen your supervisee in awhile, it might be that they are completely comfortable with their work and are doing wonderfully. Or it might mean that they've become invisible. Either way, it's best to go find them.

So now if point number 1 and 2 in the quest to develop the supervisee's individual pathway to success gone well, then you are in the chair across from your supervisor's desk, asking questions. Which leads us to point number 3. MAKE IT CLEAR THAT YOU WANT THE TRUTH. So many well intentioned supervisors want to protect their supervisees from the harsh realities of the profession. Which is a very kind gesture, but it may end up being a disservice. Every graduate student has a vague idea about the managed care mess. However, few are getting straight answers about it. I had one supervisor who said, "Maybe insurance will be better by the time you get there," and another who said, "Don't worry about that yet." Converse to these responses, a psychologist I work for handed me correspondence letter from the insurance company and said, "Here is the nightmare you have to look forward to." It may have been blunt, but reading that letter was more education about the business of psychotherapy than any of my supervisors had provided.

Make it clear that you want the truth. Being shielded is nice, and being fed the profession in bite-sized pieces is easier. But when we head out as young professionals, we will only be armed with what we understand to be the truth.

And my last point in helping to supervisees to find their own pathway to success, is to NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF BAD ADVICE. I had a professor who told me that the only way to reliably get a job after graduation was to work with children. Because child jobs are always available. Bad advice. I am not meant to work with children. Yet obviously, my professor felt this was a helpful tidbit and wished that he had been told this earlier. So what was good advice for him, was bad advice for me, and somewhere in that difference lay important information that would help me better define myself as a professional. When you can't exactly figure out what you are, knowing what you aren't isn't a step backward, but it might be a giant step forward. Do not run from ill-fitting advice, but stop to examine what aspect of that advice doesn't fit you. What doesn't fit might be just as indicative of your professional style as what does.

Which means that as supervisors, you can feel free to share with your supervisee bad advice that you've received. It's doubtful that the person who passed it onto you did so because they felt it would be useless. It probably worked for them, and even though it didn't work for you, it might work for your supervisee. Remember, you aren't trying to make them into you; you are trying to help them develop into themselves.

So the bottom line of all of this is, ASK, TAKE UP SPACE, REQUEST THE TRUTH, AND NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF BAD ADVICE. If your pathway to success is paved, you are probably just trespassing on somebody else's. However, if you commit to creating relationships with supervisors that are based on developing your own direction, your path will emerge soon enough.

Thank you.

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